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ABSTRACT

A female African American educator with dreadlocks in a class of predominantly white college students begins each semester by warning students that the terms "black" and "white" will be used regularly. She also points out factors that might inhibit speaking in class, such as white students' fears that awkward phrasing of their questions or comments might classify them as racist in many minds. She also acknowledges that many black students, who may be just as new to the information gained in African American literature classes as whites, will often become angry and fear that their anger will reveal itself in their comments. The class is asked to forego all judgment. In addition, she tries to decenter her authority as much as possible and to show students that she values all of their comments. Assignments literally force the students to present their own feelings about the works. Students must interrogate the readings, especially those which serve to bring them up to date on the conversation surrounding the works of literature as well as the historical background and context. Lively debate is also encouraged. One of the most gratifying things about teaching at Lake Forest College is the autonomy and support the educator is granted in designing her own classes. Out of this freedom came her course on Blues Women in African American Literature. In this course students examine racism directed toward southern blacks, confront issues of sexism, and critique prescribed notions of womanhood. (NKA)

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Unlearning Racism: The Classroom as Community

by Judy Massey Dozier

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"Unlearning Racism: The Classroom as Community"

How does a black female African Americanist with dreadlocks move beyond stereotypes and succeed in a class of predominately white students in an upper class suburb to form a community around the issue of race? Well, first by confronting the issues head on. I agree with Toni Morrison that our society has a language of manners that inhibits talk of race in polite conversation. Therefore, I begin each semester by warning students that we will be using the terms black and white regularly. I realize that even though teaching approaches are changing, students will probably hear these terms more in my classes than in many of their others. I also point out factors that might inhibit speaking in class. I explain how white students may fear that awkward phrasing of their questions or comments may possibly classify them as racists in many minds. Unfortunately, the search for just the right way to state a good idea, a valid question or even a positive comment often ends in silence. I also acknowledge that many black students, who may be just as new to the information gained in African American literature classes as whites, will often become angry and fear that their anger will reveal itself in their comments. I ask the class to forego all judgment. After all, I reason, the white students are not required to take my classes so their attendance suggests their interest. Therefore, any comments that might appear to be laced with a hint of racism should be pardoned. Similarly, blacks' anger should not be judged as a challenge to whites in the group. Such a discussion is the beginning of classroom community building. As we all realize how race and language impact every students' ability to speak freely, we form our first common ground.

In addition, I try to decenter my authority as much as possible. I insist that all students refer to me as Dr. Dozier, in spite of the fact that many of them feel close enough to tell me their innermost secrets. My title makes the most of my position by consciously or unconsciously affirming the possibility for black students and female students to achieve at high levels. I also learn every students' name, and this is a real challenge for me. For instance, this semester I had close to 80 students, and I am a person who remembers faces, often struggling to attach names to them.

I try very hard to show students that I value all of their comments, often helping students formulate questions and comments that are in direct opposition to my own. Although I am the professor, I make it clear that I do not know it all. And just as importantly, they, as students, bring the value of their unique experiences to our readings. My classes consist of students from wealthy backgrounds, students from working class households, students who have attended prestigious boarding schools, students who have gone through public school systems, foreign students who are miles away from home, speaking and writing in a second language, Latinos and Native Americans who find a semblance of their own struggles reflected in writings by African Americans. Such a rich composition of diverse experiences so often results in spirited responses to the readings. Recently, as I spoke on Zora Neale Hurston's preservation of dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I insisted that a translation to standard English would have distorted the values Hurston strived to maintain. As I looked out into the class, one Japanese student was smiling and nodding her head in understanding and agreement.

When grading papers, I respect any argument that is well supported, and I encourage students to disagree with me. I try very hard to get them out of the thinking

that they must absorb what I give them as the right answer and regurgitate it in their papers and exams. In fact, my assignments literally force them to present their own feelings about the works. I seldom require that they do outside research. Although I think this is an important exercise, I am assured that they will get plenty of experience with this outside of my literature classes. Instead I continue a practice I learned in graduate school when I team-taught with Pamela. After reading both fiction and non-fiction in our class, her assignments focused on getting students to think through their own assumptions and have faith in their own conclusions. In the same manner, students in my classes must interrogate the readings, especially those which serve to bring them up to date on the conversation surrounding the works of literature as well as the historical background and context. I encourage also lively debate. And I don't view disagreements as negative learning behavior. I merely insist that we all respect one another's opinions whether we agree with them or not. Lively debate has very beneficial consequences for student understanding, especially when engaging a hot topic such as race. Of course, I realize that since I choose the reading materials, my classes are not free of bias. But the material I select is often chosen because of its absence from texts in traditional courses that include discussions or race. Thus the students have an alternative viewpoint to the ones they may have heard in other classes where the subject of race is explored. One of my most salient examples of this practice occurs in my discussion of Shug's and Celie's sexual relationship in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Instead of pronouncing this a lesbian relationship, we examine the possibility of an alternative way of reading this event. According to Zora Neale Hurston, in Jamaica where West African beliefs and rituals are blended with western traditions, older women introduced young virgins to

sexual pleasure. They too fondle these women in an attempt to show them how to direct their husbands toward satisfying their desires. These were not homosexual encounters, but rather women teaching other women how to explore their own bodies that they may in turn guide their husbands. Shug repeatedly refers to Celie as a virgin since, although she has given birth twice, she has never experienced sexual pleasure. Such an interpretation presents the possibility of their sexual encounter as one of sharing and instruction. This interpretation offers alternative ways of reading while introducing the possibility of African continuities in African American experiences.

Despite the fact that I stress each student's responsibility to speak in classroom community, many are still hesitant. To help ease them into this community conversation, I avoid forcing such participation by calling on them. Oral participation is completely voluntary. Those reluctant to speak in the beginning, may respond to me privately in our regular informal responses which are ungraded. Here I make extensive comments, especially in the beginning allowing these responses to become a testing ground for speaking about race. I insist that only by asking our deepest questions will we, as an American society, begin to heal the problems of a nation still divided along racial lines. You see in my classes we are not only studying literature for a class and a grade, we are developing our understanding in a manner that will assist us as we move beyond the walls of academia. Although black students are often empowered by my presence and the content and focus of the classes, all of my students form a community based on their positioning as members of this society. Our community extends to our responsibility to this class focused on critical examination of existing attitudes as much as literary

analyses. I am thrilled that very often students continue conversations begun in the class outside of our sessions.

One of the most gratifying things about teaching at Lake Forest College has been the autonomy and support I am granted in designing my own classes. Out of this freedom came my course on Blues Women in African American Literature. In this course students examine racism directed toward southern blacks, confront issues of sexism, and critique prescribed notions of womanhood. Unlearning racism requires that we all examine the ways racist thoughts and feelings have permeated our consciousness. Blues singers, with their bold, individual style and behaviors allow all students to take a look at standards of behavior for women, standards of beauty set by racist measures, and sexist attitudes toward women. I've had black men in my classes after an examination of *The Color Purple* recognize that they've held certain sexist opinions and resolve to change in their relations with their girlfriends.

In conclusion, I don't offer my philosophy as a perfect classroom approach, and I am constantly reevaluating my teaching strategies in an attempt to "get it right." But as bell hooks reminds us, when we teach to transgress we will make mistakes and constantly evaluate ourselves. In Pamela's terms, we are always "passing." As we follow our own inner guidance, listening to ourselves and our students, we make our contribution to the idea and the hope of a world community.

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